



MDC At-a-Glance

MDC is a non-profit based in Durham, NC, that equips Southern leaders, institutions, and communities with the necessary tools and strategies to advance equity—particularly racial and gender equity—and economic mobility.

For over 50 years, institutions, communities, foundations, and others across the South have turned to MDC for deep knowledge and proven tools to design, demonstrate, and sustain what works to boost members of underinvested communities to higher rungs on the economic ladder. We now seek to build on that legacy to achieve greater impact in the 13 states we serve.

Our Approach

- **Research and Analysis:** MDC collects and analyzes economic and demographic data across the South to create a compelling narrative of where the region is and where it may be headed. Since 1996, MDC's landmark, [State of the South](#) report has been the product of that rigorous analysis. State of the South is now evolving from a report to a broadcast channel engaging a spectrum of stakeholders in solutions-oriented conversations about the issues that matter to communities in the region.
- **Systems Design for Systems Change:** *State of the South* informs our work and drives efforts to shift and change systems. At MDC, we interrogate how systems impact people and how they can be shifted or reimaged to achieve better outcomes.
- **Equity-centered leadership:** At MDC, we believe leaders are lifelong learners and can be found anywhere. They come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. Drawing on [Passing Gear Philanthropy](#) principles, we work with leaders to build the skills they desire to lead transformative change in their communities. Our approach to cultivating leadership is collaborative, focused on human dignity, and dedicated to improving the lives of all.

"By changing who's in the conversation, communities can reorient governments, nonprofits and other organizations to provide the foundations that people need to thrive: stabilized finances, quality education and good health care. This is equity-centered leadership."—John Simpkins, President and CEO, MDC

Our Work

The "vaccine era" is upon us. Historic levels of federal investment, combined with philanthropic and corporate commitments, create conditions for Southern communities to make a giant leap in improved quality of life, opportunity, and life choices. Through our demographic and economic data analysis, MDC can shine a light on underinvestment and its effects. By designing systems to achieve systemic change, we can act on what the data show us and reimagine both the ends and the operations of support systems. Undergirding those activities with a vision of leadership focused on curiosity, trust, courage, and staying power will yield a generative environment in which new ideas can flourish.

MDC projects over five decades have helped Southern leaders and communities advance economic mobility for people on the margins through education, employment, economic security, and strategic philanthropy. With and within communities, our programs work to:

- Frame a Southern equity agenda (Landmark *State of the South* report)
- Strengthen opportunities for young children and school-age youth
- Support the progression of postsecondary attainment
- Build and support workforce systems for living-wage employment
- Increase family economic security
- Build "Passing Gear" philanthropy to support an equity agenda
- Strengthen economically vulnerable rural communities

We prioritize the importance of place in our programmatic work and view it through the lenses of:

- Grounding in community context – history and data
- Asset orientation
- Systems change approach
- Collaboration, bridging divides
- Ensuring voice of traditionally marginalized
- Equity
- Racial equity

Rural Communities

MDC continues to work to amplify our impact on rural development – allowing MDC’s national research and analysis to be further grounded in local practice and expansion to other states. Our experience working with rural communities informs regional and national rural development strategies and initiatives, particularly within the southern United States.

[Rural Forward](#)

Working collaboratively with the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust, Rural Forward provides program-wide guidance, identifies opportunities for community collaboration, and develops technical assistance and support programs in 10 rural NC counties through the Trust’s Healthy Places NC initiative.

One in five North Carolinians, almost 2.2 million people, live in rural counties. Compared to towns and cities, those living in these rural areas face unique barriers to accessing critically needed health care and social support services. At the same time, North Carolina’s rural communities are full of natural, social, economic, cultural, and human capital that can be used as the building blocks to prosperity. The new rural economy is more interconnected, built upon our global economy, and more tied into regional opportunity.

Rural Forward NC was created in 2014 to provide technical assistance and support to 10 rural counties in partnership with the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust. The Healthy Places NC work continues today, and Rural Forward has grown to support additional funders and organizations working in rural areas. Founded initially as a program of the Foundation for Health Leadership & Innovation (FHLI), Rural Forward NC supports the nonprofit, clinical, and human service leaders within Healthy Places NC counties. The program supports communities through capacity building, strategic planning, coaching, facilitation, and resource development tools to make rural counties healthier and more thriving.

[NCIDR](#)

The North Carolina Inclusive Disaster Recovery Network (NCIDR) is a collaborative of public, private, non-profit, and faith organizations seeking avenues for community voice and equitable access to resources in a disaster recovery system. Working with the network is a great way for statewide organizations to be good allies for community-based organizations engaged in on-the-ground disaster recovery. Rural Forward, a program of MDC serves as convener for NCIDR.

[RuraLead](#)

RuraLead is a learning initiative that seeks to understand the most effective leadership qualities and leadership development practices in rural communities throughout the United States. The initiative includes a “learning journey” throughout the United States, learning from rural leaders through programming unfolding in different geographic regions: Appalachia, the Midwest, the Southeast, and the Northwest.

MDC is the regional, Southeastern partner for RuraLead, building on MDC’s long history of advancing rural leadership development and helping foundations learn. In this case, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation supported RuraLead to gain knowledge about the varied paths that rural leaders take to foster equitable change in their communities.

The initiative comprises three components:

- Rural Leadership Scan – As an initial step in this work, MDC worked with regional partners to support a scan of rural leadership development across the United States. The resulting inventory, while not comprehensive, provides a scan of programs and initiatives that seek to create, cultivate, activate, and sustain a diverse and inclusive set of leaders to amplify and connect the voices of leaders across the rural Southeast.
- Learning Journey – In October 2020, MDC engaged rural leaders and practitioners, as well as funders, in a Southeastern virtual learning journey to examine what good leadership looks like in practice. Rural leaders from throughout the region highlighted their personal leadership journeys, shared within the context of the region's unique and troubled history and current opportunities and challenges facing the rural South. Convening participants began to outline the resources and lessons that are critical for sharing with the broader field of leaders in rural America.
- National Convening – Learning journeys will culminate and coalesce in a national convening where lessons from journeys and in-depth interviews with rural leadership and funders will be synthesized toward stronger knowledge about what is needed to better support rural leadership development.

More on MDC's Work

- MDC President and CEO John Simpkins [describes MDC's work](#) to the United Philanthropy Forum.
- [State of the South in the Covid Era](#) (webinar): A conversation with MDC Board Vice Chair Dr. William Spriggs
- [State of the South 2018: Recovering our Courage](#)
- [State of the South: North Carolina's Economic Imperative: Building an Infrastructure of Opportunity](#)
- [Rural Forward leads session of UNC School of Public Health's Gillings on the Ground, to introduce the concept of trauma-informed recovery and the work of NCIDR as an opportunity for collaborative systems change. \(webinar\)](#)
- MDC Reports for the Southern Partnership to Reduce Debt (SPRD):
 - [Southern Indebtedness: Root Causes of Debt](#)
 - [Southern Indebtedness: The Impact of Excessive Debt on Youth and Young Adults' Progression through the Talent Development System](#)
 - [Southern Indebtedness: An equity-driven policy agenda to address the consumer debt crisis](#)
- [Early childhood and economic mobility: Investments in the early years yield interest](#)
- [Critical Infrastructure: Supporting and Strengthening Informal Child Care](#)
- [The Community College as Change Agent: How Community Colleges Address Health Issues in Counties Served by the Healthy Places North Carolina Initiative](#)